

Planning for learning: An exploration of reception teachers' attitudes and practices around the South Australian School Entry Assessment Policy

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*The South Australian Education Department introduced the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy in 2001 to help teachers assess young learners and plan relevant learning events, to help collect information about South Australian education from Pre-School to Year 3, and to facilitate collaboration within and between educational and social institutions. Implementation of the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy was supported in a limited number of schools by the School Entry Assessment Mentor Project (SEAMP), which reported generally positive results and concluded that mentoring was an effective way to support new policy implementation. However, the SEA Mentor Project was discontinued in 2005, and it remains unclear how teachers and schools that were **not** mentored are implementing the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy, how they are feeling about its implementation, what training and supports they have received, or how they are using the accompanying documentation. This exploratory qualitative study involved comparative analysis of interview responses from eight Reception teachers currently working in South Australian public (state) schools. It was found that positive attitudes towards the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy have not necessarily translated into a thorough policy implementation in some schools; that the practices and attitudes of some teachers may be based on limited understandings about the aims of the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy; and that some Reception teachers may not be involving parents and caregivers in their considerations about the policy. It also appears that some teachers believe the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy only concerns the first year of school (Reception in South Australia). Data collected for this study lends weight to concerns about the disenfranchisement of teachers and about teachers' workloads, especially concerning non-teaching or administrative expectations, and suggests that more inclusive policy-development processes may engender more commitment to shared goals. The argument is made that new policy must include an adequate budget for initial training and ongoing support to facilitate a successful and thorough policy implementation, and that the savings made in initial expenditure may be a false economy, leading to less efficient long-term use of limited public resources.*

Qualitative comparative research, Junior Primary, elementary education, policy implementation, supports for teachers, South Australian education

INTRODUCTION

Policy focus on assessment, standards, and accountability in education is occurring as part of the globalisation of our world, and Bottery and Wright (2000) argue this focus has implications both for teachers' professional practice and the nature of democratic society. The professional practice of South Australian Reception teachers is influenced at three levels: the school-community level (often led by principals, senior staff and school-community leaders); the State level (eg: *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework* – see DECS

2006a); and the national/federal level (eg: the Australian *National Literacy and Numeracy Test* – see MCEETYA 2006). This paper concerns the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* introduced in 2001 by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). This policy was devised to help inform the ongoing development of the State's *Early Years Literacy Program* (DECS 2006b) which aims specifically to improve literacy outcomes for children from Birth to Year 3.

This exploratory study involved interviewing eight Reception teachers, working in eight different public Primary and Junior Primary schools within the Adelaide metropolitan area in 2006. I designed the study to explore how teachers were feeling about the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* (DECS 2006c); and how they were using the accompanying *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a). Results gathered through interviews with this small sample cannot be generalised to the broader population of Reception teachers, however issues and themes explored may be relevant to other educators, and some insights might be gleaned about effective policy implementation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research project used comparative analysis techniques to explore themes and issues in the interview responses of participants. Qualitative research uses words instead of numbers to describe and explore issues and ideas which are revealed through the "lived experience" of participants (Patton 2002; Lichtman 2006). Interviews were "guided" (Patton 2002) but based on a set of mainly open-ended questions about attitudes and practices. Participants' responses were transcribed, categorised and explored using the coding systems of Grounded Theory Analysis, but this project was also phenomenological in that it explored participants' experiences of the same event (Patton 2002) – that is, the introduction of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* in South Australia.

This undergraduate honours project was supervised by an experienced tertiary-level researcher and the ethical protocols of educational research were followed in this study; this includes strict confidentiality, and all names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

Exploring the Aims of the School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy

Implementation of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* included the development and publication of the *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a) and accompanying *Information for Educators* (DETE 2002b) handbook. The *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a) was designed to fulfil two major functions: to act as a tool for teaching; and to be a platform for communication between educational and social contexts. The South Australian Education Department stated five aims in the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy*:

- a) the collection of information about the competencies and learning dispositions of beginning students within the first ten weeks of schooling (the mandated part of the policy – the actual School Entry Assessment);
- b) providing a platform for home-school communication and communication between pre-schools, schools, and other institutions;
- c) providing an ongoing record of each child's development and progress Towards Standard 1 in *The SACSA Framework*, with focus on appropriate and timely intervention to meet diverse needs;
- d) providing state-wide data for research into better education practices and policies (including informing the *Early Years Literacy Program*); and,
- e) informing teacher's beliefs, planning and practices through ongoing training and supports.

In the following sections of this paper, I will outline the major findings of this study around each of the stated aims (above) of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* and then explore the major themes and recommendations arising from my analysis of participants' responses.

The Ten-Week School Entry Assessment (SEA) in Reception

The *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* mandates that Reception teachers should use *Learner Record* booklets (DETE 2002a) to do thorough formative assessments of each child's literacy and numeracy within the first ten weeks of the child starting school in South Australia.

It is important to be clear: this study concerned the implementation of **one** specific policy; and I found that, whether currently using *Learner Record* booklets or not, all Reception teachers interviewed for this study are collecting information about the competencies, preferences and experiences of beginning students. All participants exhibited a passionate commitment to the learning and welfare of the children.

That said, I found that five out of the eight Reception teachers interviewed had done formative ten-week School Entry Assessments using the *Learner Record* booklets in 2006. This aim seemed to be well-understood by all eight participants, yet there was a difference in opinion about whether or not there was an educational purpose for this policy. While some participants were not convinced, others were more sure:

...you know, if you're blasé about these books [*Learner Records*]... ...then when the child gets to Year 1 or Year 2 and the teacher is talking about... ...oh, [the student] can't do this, they can't do that. [pause] You haven't really done your job properly! [laughs] (Felicity)

I found that implementation of the policy had regressed at two schools:

...that's all petered out now, and then we heard that they were changing it anyway, so that's where our school sits with it... ...no-one looked at it, and we don't use it as a whole school for anything, so we just thought, well that's a waste of time. No data's fed into the department... (Eileen)

Rumours of the demise of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* were common in this study, and a sense of frustration was evident in some interview responses that a personal professional commitment to effective use of *Learner Records* was being undermined by a lack of commitment to the policy by others. Perceptions of a lack of commitment to the policy may have contributed to some teachers' decisions concerning their use of *Learner Record* booklets. The web-site dedicated to the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* (see DECS 2006c) has recently been changed, and it appears the policy has merged with the *Early Years Literacy Program* (DECS 2006b) and Education Department services in general.

Providing a platform for Communication

The *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a) was designed to act as a platform for communication between teachers (as students move from class to class and/or school to school), between teachers and parents and caregivers, and also between teachers, schools and the South Australian Education Department. By summarising their assessments according to a staged developmental paradigm, comprising five stages, from 'Awareness' to 'Application' (DETE 2002a&b), teachers were encouraged in the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* to contribute to the formation of a State-wide data-set through the internet. This study did not focus on this aspect of communication, but instead focussed on the teacher-teacher and teacher-parent communications. I found some major mis-matches between these stated policy aims and current practices at the schools explored. While two participants had mentioned *Learner Records* to parents, six had not, and it appeared that a lack of initial training and ongoing supports (including release-time) may have contributed to these results.

I haven't said anything to parents. No. Even at the other schools, nuh, nothing was mentioned at any other schools. At all. (Ann)

There was a divide in opinion among participants about whether or not the *Learner Record* booklet is suitable for parents, but it appeared that some participants had not considered this possibility prior to interviews:

Researcher: How do you think [parents would] go with the language, and the size of it [the *Learner Record*], and the fact it's kind of been created for teachers?

Hannah: Um, [pause] well, probably if I explained what it was, and I actually said to [parents]... ..as a general rule, most children are, you know, performing here... ..just as a rough guide. However, your child is right down here, and that flags to me that we've got some really hard work to do to include the parent... ..I'd probably say, well this is what we need to work on at home or at school, and I'd probably use it that way.

Researcher: Do you think seeing this kind of information [indicates *Learner Record*] would help parents to help their child?

Hannah: I think so, I think so. It would be very helpful, yeah, I never thought of that.

I cannot say if the *Learner Record* should be used for communicating with parents, but recommend that if it is to be used in this role, teachers may wish to consider the “window of opportunity” (Shopen & Liddicoat 2000) parent-teacher interviews may offer for using the *Learner Record* booklets to involve parents and caregivers more deeply in their children's education, and for using parents as sources of “expert knowledge” (Graue & Brown 2003).

Teacher-to-teacher communication was also found to be quite limited at the schools explored, which leads into findings around the third major stated aim of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy*: collaboration between teachers in order to ‘track’ each student's progress Towards Standard 1 of *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework* (DECS 2006a).

Tracking each child's progress Towards Standard 1 of the SACSA Framework

I found inconsistencies in the way the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* appeared to be conceptualised by some participants, and there seems to be some confusion around the stated aim of monitoring every student's progress Towards Standard 1. Reaching Standard 1 of *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework* coincides, for most students, with the end of Year 2 (DECS 2006a), thus ‘tracking’ each child's progress Towards Standard 1 is a collaborative act which involves teachers from pre-school to Year 3.

However, I found in my study that even in the three schools where the Reception teacher interviewed is using the *Learner Record* booklet in ongoing ways, use of the booklets may be stopping at the end of the first year of schooling. While more research needs to be done, I found some evidence that *Learner Records* may be placed on file in some schools before students reach Standard 1/Year 3:

It's only done after the ten weeks, and it's not touched again... (Debra)

They [*Learner Records*] go down to the office and stay in the [students'] records... ..the teachers don't actually use them again. (Felicity)

...it's very good, and it keeps you focussed... ..but when you're the only one in the school using [the *Learner Record* booklet], you're a bit lonely. There's only you. You've got no-one to talk to about it because you're the only one doing it. And the [other teachers] don't really have time. (Hannah)

While some participants expressed positive attitudes towards the *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a), some teachers interviewed were quite clear they do not believe the *Learner Record* contains the information needed to plan to meet the needs of young learners:

I don't find it's a useful document [the *Learner Record*]. I have never looked back at any information in there. If I get a child who's coming into my class who I haven't had... ...I never look back at their *School Entry Assessment* information, and there wouldn't be one teacher here in the school who's ever looked back... ...no-one ever looks at them. The information in there isn't anything that we find relevant or need to know. (Isa)

Again, I cannot say if the *Learner Record* should be used as a teaching tool, but further research is recommended to explore issues concerning the educational and pedagogical usefulness of information recorded in the booklets.

State-Wide Data Collection

The *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* encourages participation by teachers in the formation of a State-wide data-set which describes the competencies and needs of young South Australian learners. Collecting information about the competencies and needs of young students seems a theoretically valuable idea for helping to plan to meet the needs of individuals and communities (see Justice, Invernizzi, Geller, Sullivan, and Welsch 2005; and Nixon, Comber, Hill, and Badger 1998), however, this study could not encompass digital aspects of the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* (the accompanying CD-ROM or the state-wide data-collection protocols) and further research is recommended. If a state-wide data-set is to be useful and valid, it must be representative of all South Australian learners, and debates about the reliability of information gathered and the cost-effectiveness of such programs must be addressed (Flynn & Rahbar 1998).

Informing teachers' beliefs, planning and practices through ongoing training and supports

The stated aim of informing and supporting teachers appears to refer to what teachers should receive to facilitate their implementation of new policy, yet I found little evidence that the Reception teachers interviewed are receiving the ongoing training and support needed for thorough policy implementation. Some participants reported having received no training at all, and reactions to the policy were divided.

Eileen: One of the teachers went to an afternoon session, you know, T and D [Training and Development], about it.

Researcher: But you didn't?

Eileen: I didn't, and she came back saying, "Ohhh, so much work, it's going to be terrible!"

Hannah described a similar introduction to the policy, but a different reaction to the *Learner Record*:

Researcher: What prompted you to start using [the *Learner Record*]?

Hannah: We got told we had to... ...it was just another thing added on to SACSA, so we did it.

Researcher: 'Cause it was from the Department?

Hannah: Yeah. But it's actually very good. I quite like it. [pause] So, we're good little vegemites – we do what we're told! [laughs]

Results from this study suggest that the construction of shared understandings about the aims of education policy might be beneficial for successful, equitable, and cost-effective policy implementation. Current training and support regimens for the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* remain unclear, and questions arising from this study include: which teachers are being trained at the moment; what training are they receiving; when are teachers supposed to engage in 'ongoing Professional Development'; and, specifically, how much release-time should teachers receive to implement the *SEA Policy*?

It is also not made clear in the *School Entry Assessment (SEA)* documentation exactly what 'beliefs' and 'practices' the South Australian Education Department may wish to promote or change. Results suggest that desired outcomes need to be more explicit, both in documentation and in training, so that teaching professionals are able to contribute to debates around new directions in education and make informed decisions about their use of new policies and documents and data flowing from such use.

Time, professional autonomy, and the status of teachers

'Time' and 'workload' were major themes in this study. That is, all participants expressed some measure of concern about finding enough "time" to do everything they believed they needed to do in order to meet their professional obligations:

there are so many different documents coming from the Education Department, all of the time, sometimes it's a little unrealistic to expect that you would be able to implement all of those things. (Beth)

...time. Just time. Time's the big factor, really, and if you do all this work and don't use it productively [referring to filling out *Learner Records*] then, there's no point. Which is what I've been doing of late, in previous schools, just highlighting 'cause I have to, and never looking at it again. (Cath)

In 1998, the Australian Senate Employment, Education and Training (EET) References Committee heard evidence that, as professionals, teachers have been "disenfranchised from decision making processes at all levels" (Senate EET References Committee 1998, p. 3). Some Reception teachers interviewed for this study did say they felt removed from policy development, and that this made them "feel bad" and "frustrated"; but some participants expressed a reluctance, and even cynicism, about being involved at a policy-development level. I also found that the teachers interviewed for this study are regularly giving up un-paid personal time to meet some policy expectations:

I usually do it in the holidays as my holiday project. Whoever [beginning student] started at the start of the Term, I take home [their *Learner Record*] in the holidays... so that I know I'm up-to-date... (Isa)

Solutions to problems arising from these issues are not immediately obvious, as it seems not even paid release-time can solve this dilemma for some teachers:

Researcher: Do you think it would just come down to being paid to do more hours? I mean, is it possible to fit more in the hours you already do?

Hannah: Oh, impossible. I work 50 hours a week now. I feel I do more than enough. That's without my T-and-D [Training and Development] and stuff, that we do. Ah, I feel I do enough. [laughs]

While I found a divide in opinions, some participants suggested that with adequate time and supports there could be benefits to the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy*:

I mean, if it's another thing lumped on to do after work you tend to get a bit negative about it and probably not embrace it as much. But if there was time put aside for it I

think we'd all benefit. Well I would certainly benefit, not having been using [the *Learner Record*] in a productive way, it would be great. (Cath)

Finding the balance in Reception

Felicity, a very experienced teacher, expressed eloquently the concern raised by several participants that Reception teachers must build relationships with students, and must find a balance between ensuring beginning students have a fun and successful transition to formal schooling, and also helping each child construct the knowledge needed for mainstream scholastic success:

... you can become locked in to doing too much assessment, and forget that you're there as a Reception teacher, and that children should be enjoying being at school, and having fun experiences... ...it's having that balance; not becoming too bogged down with assessment, and thinking, yes, the children have achieved "that", and move on. (Felicity)

These concerns are consistent with contemporary arguments that the first year of schooling should not have an academic focus but that focus should be on ensuring a successful transition and acclimatisation to the new social context of school (Walpole, Chow & Justice 2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results from this study support notions about the benefits of inclusive and collaborative policy-development processes, and the social and economic potential of more democratic approaches to education generally. This report includes several major recommendations which are outlined below.

1. The development of more inclusive and collaborative policy-development processes

Attitudes towards a policy can significantly influence teachers' classroom practices (Barcan 1990; Hill & Crevola 1997; Shopen and Liddicoat 2000; Raban & Ure 2006) and implementation of new policy may be hampered if teachers are not convinced, as professionals, that the policy is worthwhile. I found evidence to suggest commitment to new policy might be enhanced through inclusive policy-development and decision-making processes which involve stakeholders from the very beginning of the policy-design process so that their needs and expectations are reflected in the final policy and documentation.

Jack and Luganoff (2004) argue that by "expanding the franchise" and giving stakeholders a voice in policy development, more long-term commitment to shared goals can be engendered, leading not only to more collaborative and democratic relationships between stakeholders, but also, perhaps, to more efficient use of resources.

2. The need to incorporate adequate training and supports into budgeting for new policy

This study collected data that suggest that long-term policy implementation may benefit from a larger budget for initial training and support. The *School Entry Assessment Mentor Project (SEAMP)* did seem to offer the collaborative framework and inter-institutional support systems which could facilitate a successful policy implementation (see DECS 2006b), yet the *SEA Mentor Project* was discontinued in 2005 because of economic circumstances. More research is recommended to ascertain if it may be more effective in the long-term to increase initial expenditure, to spend more on ensuring adequate training for all those expected to comply with a new policy, rather than trying to support implementation when stakeholders may not be fully informed.

3. The need to consider the question: is Reception teaching a specialist role?

I recommend serious consideration of the notion that Reception teaching may be a specialist role which may require specific supports, especially, perhaps, the provision of extra training for effective and equitable early assessments with very young students, extra School Support Officers (or even smaller class-sizes?), and extra release-time for working with parents, families, and significant adults in the lives of children.

If Reception teachers are to be expected to make thorough formative assessments for every beginning student in the first ten weeks of school, and to use this information effectively to “support planning and programming” (*Information for Educators* handbook, DETE 2002b), it seems reasonable to expect that teachers are given the time and support they need to reach desired outcomes.

4. The need for collaboration across educational contexts and across research disciplines

This study revealed data which reinforces arguments for whole-school planning (see Hill and Crevola 1997), and the development of more holistic and collaborative conceptualisations of education and research. The tensions between different stakeholders and different perspectives in Australian education appear to contribute to a certain “stagnancy”, where the same arguments and problems appear to keep re-surfacing (Jamrozik 2001) within a triumvirate of over-lapping, and even competing policy paradigms, at Federal, State and Territory, and local levels.

5. A deeper consideration of the Principle of ‘Universal Design’

My study drew on Dillon’s (2006) work concerning equitable and effective assessment in education, and I incorporated the principle of ‘universal design’ into my analysis. Dillon (2006) describes universal design as a “reversal of traditional design”: rather than basing design on population averages and norms or “standard achievement”. Dillon (2006) argues that design should be informed by the needs of the most restricted user. I found that the principle of universal design offered a useful framework for testing a new policy based on how it affects stakeholders with the most needs. By identifying ‘universal’ needs, Dillon (2006) argues more equitable and effective assessment and policy-design is possible.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was exploratory, and further research is recommended to ascertain how the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* is being implemented in South Australian public schools, if it is to be continued. Further research is recommended to ascertain what supports teachers and schools need for a thorough policy implementation; and how Reception teachers in particular might be better supported in their professional roles.

Even if the *School Entry Assessment (SEA) Policy* is not continued, or continued but without the current *Learner Record* booklet (DETE 2002a), there are lessons which might be drawn from the experiences of participants in this study. Goffin and Lombardi (1998) argue that teachers are perfectly placed to monitor the effects of policy, and to offer insights which are helpful for the development of good education policy. I suggest that by involving stakeholders more deeply in policy-development, policy-makers might construct more universal and flexible policies which could engender more positive attitudes and long-term commitment to shared goals. However, this study found evidence that positive attitudes alone may not be sufficient for thorough and successful policy implementation, and that training and support for implementation of the *School Entry Assessment (Sea) Policy* were generally quite sparse in the schools explored. Data gathered for this project reinforces arguments that more inclusive and collaborative educational approaches could be more equitable, more productive and more economically efficient.

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